

Australian turtle scientists track declining populations on beaches

By Melissa Davey, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.06.17

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People watch behind a barrier as a baby sea turtle heads to the sea in Saint-Aygulf beach near Cannes, France, October 3, 2016. Yann Coatsaliou/AFP/Getty Images

It's about 7 p.m. at the isolated Wreck Rock Beach in Queensland, Australia. Nev and Bev McLachlan are starting the night watch.

For the past 40 years the husband and wife have been traveling from their home on the Sunshine Coast to a tiny campsite near the ocean. Their car is filled with camp supplies as well as turtle tagging gear.

As the sun goes down, Nev, 64, and Bev, 61, pull on their bright orange turtle patrol shirts. They grab their helmets and their walkie-talkies and jump onto separate quad bikes.

They drive to the 22-kilometer (14-mile) stretch of beach, alongside the southern Great Barrier Reef. Then they start their patrol up and down the sand. Their watch sometimes continues until the crack of dawn, until the endangered female loggerhead turtles they are there to monitor stop emerging from the water to lay their eggs.

Protecting Turtles

The McLachlans' careful work has helped researchers better understand and protect the turtles.

Wreck Rock is one of a handful of sites around Australia where loggerhead turtles come to lay their eggs. Green turtles and flatback turtles also come to lay eggs on the beach. The McLachlans collect information about those species, too, but the loggerhead is their focus.

Nev and Bev McLachlan stay for most of the turtle nesting and hatching season, which lasts from November to February. Sometimes they are joined by turtle patrol volunteers.

"I do sometimes think about who will do this when we can't any more," Bev McLachlan says one night as she patrols the beach.

The quad bikes are driven about 20 meters (66 feet) up from the water so the headlights don't confuse or frighten the turtles. Bev McLachlan cuts the engine. In the distance she has spotted a dark shadow on the sand. Slowly, a loggerhead is making her way up the shore, leaving tracks about 3 feet wide behind her.

Tag, You're It!

Once the turtle begins laying her eggs, she is so focused that she does not mind when Bev starts examining her for tags. Bev is done well before the turtle needs to make her way back to the sea.

It is rare for Nev and Bev McLachlan to find a turtle that hasn't been tagged. This is disturbing, because it means the hatchlings aren't surviving until maturity. After hatching, the turtles get carried in the southern Pacific current to the waters off Peru and Chile.

About 20 to 40 years later, the females reach maturity. Then they return to the same beach where they were born to lay their eggs.

The turtles have faced many challenges over the years, Bev McLachlan says. In the early days, before the area was made a national park, they were disturbed by people coming to the beach to watch them, or worse, to take their eggs for eating. Turtles would also get caught by fishing boats that loomed just offshore.

Where Are The Middle-Aged Loggerheads?

With more than a month to go in the season, Nev and Bev McLachlan have recorded just over 100 loggerhead, flatback and green turtles at Wreck Rock. This is the same amount recorded in the entire last season.

But it was turtles tagged in previous years and increased numbers of green turtles that boosted this year's overall numbers, Bev McLachlan says. She and her husband did not see any newly matured loggerhead turtles.

The information they collect will be analyzed by Doctor Col Limpus, the chief scientist for Queensland's Department of Environment and Heritage Protection. Limpus himself is a world-famous turtle researcher.

Mon Repos Beach

While Nev and Bev McLachlan watch Wreck Rock, Limpus is out patrolling Mon Repos Beach, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) southeast. A smaller beach, less than 2 kilometers (about 1 mile) long, Limpus and his army of volunteers are able to patrol it by foot. It is the largest loggerhead nesting area in the southern hemisphere. Limpus and his team relocate turtle eggs laid on parts of the beach where they might be in danger.

Thanks to Limpus' work, Mon Repos is now home to one of the largest concentrations of nesting marine turtles in Australia. Much of what is known about turtle movements and breeding patterns is because of his work.

It was Limpus who was responsible for introducing Nev McLachlan to turtle conservation back in the 1970s. He was also the one who proposed that Wreck Rock be monitored to keep track of the turtles.

"I was a student at a teacher's training college where Col was a lecturer, and he used to recruit students to collect turtle data for him during the holiday period," Nev McLachlan says. "At the time I didn't know anything about sea turtles and just came along with Col to Mon Repos for the ride. And I got hooked."

Quiz

- 1 Which of these statements would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
 - (A) Loggerhead turtles must be protected since they are in danger.
 - (B) The McLachlans' studies have helped researchers better understand the turtles.
 - (C) Public beaches should be closed to prevent turtles from being harmed by humans.
 - (D) Researchers drive their vehicles far from the beach so they do not confuse the turtles.

- 2 What is the summary of the section "Where Are The Middle-Aged Loggerheads?"
 - (A) The McLachlans' have seen less turtles this year than last year.
 - (B) Turtles return to the beach where they were born to lay their eggs.
 - (C) Doctor Col Limpus studies turtles at Mon Repos Beach.
 - (D) The McLachlans' have not seen any new turtles this year.

- 3 Why does the author include the section "Tag, You're It!"?
 - (A) to describe the process of tagging turtles and some of the dangers facing turtles
 - (B) to describe several reasons why loggerhead turtles are an endangered species
 - (C) to explain why the McLachlans study turtles and summarize their main findings
 - (D) to support the idea that loggerhead turtles should not be tagged on beaches

- 4 How does the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] affect the overall structure of the article?
 - (A) It tells the story of how the McLachlans started studying turtles.
 - (B) It provides a call to action for people to save the loggerhead turtles.
 - (C) It describes details about the people and setting in the article.
 - (D) It gives descriptions of the animals being studied in the article.